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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of a study that examined how educational reforms, specifically those related to new content and performance standards, assessments, and enhanced accountability, are being defined and implemented at the district, school, and classroom levels and how those reforms are involving and affecting special education programs and students. During the first phase of the research, case studies of five school districts were constructed based on information obtained through in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, and extensive document reviews. The second phase of the research focused very specifically on teachers and the classrooms. Research during Phase 2 focused on four of the original five districts. Findings from the study indicate almost every teacher and every school were aware that all students were expected to participate and learn the content of the general education curriculum; however, access was dependent on a number of conditions, including teacher ownership and teacher knowledge, understanding what access to the general education curriculum means, and the perception that teachers have that they must cover more subject matter material in the same amount of time. The report concludes by calling for professional development for general and special educators that promotes mutual understanding of students and curricula. (CR)

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Reform for EVERY Learner: Teachers' Views on Standards and Students with Disabilities

The Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform

May 2000

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Margaret J. McLaughlin

The Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform

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Snapshots of Reform: How Five Local Districts Are Interpreting Standards-Based Reform for Students with Disabilities. This summary of a three-year study of reform efforts in five districts includes investigations into how the districts implemented policies on standards, assessments and accountability systems, parent and community involvement, and teacher development—and particularly looks at how these reforms affected students with disabilities. (1998, 20 pp., $7.50)

Reaching for the Sky: Technology Policies to Support the Achievement of Students with Disabilities. This guide combines the latest research findings and policy analysis to help state and local education leaders ensure that technology is effectively being used as a tool for improving children's learning, especially for children with disabilities. It contains research-based information on types of technology, ways technology can be used to enhance learning, funding policies, guidelines for assessing existing technology plans, and resources for more information. (1999, 47 pp., $14.00)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This is the second of two monographs that have been developed based on intensive research conducted over a period of four years in five local school districts across the U.S. The purpose of the research was to examine how educational reforms—specifically those related to new content and performance standards, assessments, and enhanced accountability—were being defined and implemented at the district, school, and classroom levels and how those reforms were involving and impacting special education programs and students.

During the first phase of the research, case studies of each of the five school districts were constructed based on information obtained through in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, and extensive document reviews. Interviews were conducted with central office administrators, special education supervisors/coordinators, principals, teachers, parents, and other community members. The five original districts were chosen for study because they were in states that were implementing differing educational reform models. Two of the states represented in the study had strong standards-based reform systems, including both well-developed state standards and a system of high-stakes assessments with specific sanctions and rewards for low-performing schools. Two additional states were in the beginning stages of developing similar state policies but had not yet developed assessments and accountability systems. The fifth state was a completely local-control state with almost no state-level mandates regarding performance standards; this state achieved accountability through accreditation that relied on district-developed standards and assessments.

Each of the districts was selected due to its reputation as a high-reform district, as well as its size, economic situation, and geographic location. Five case studies were developed to describe each district's reform picture. The case studies were analyzed to identify key cross-cutting themes relating to both the context for the reforms as well as the specific interpretations for students who are receiving special education and related services. The findings from Phase 1 were presented in *Snapshots of Reform: How Five Local Districts Are Interpreting Standards-Based Reform for Students with Disabilities.*

The second phase of the research focused very specifically on teachers and classrooms. The purpose of this phase was to systematically

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examine how standards, assessments, and accountability were impacting classroom practices, particularly for students with disabilities. Research during Phase 2 focused on four of the original five districts. The project staff decided to drop one of the original five districts because that district was in a state that was just beginning its reform initiative. As a result, when we visited the district we saw very little going on related to the reform efforts, particularly at the classroom level. We decided to focus on the four districts where we were fairly certain we would see the impact of reform in the classroom. The findings presented in this document come from these four districts: Bannister, Hanley County, Doyle County, and Watertown.[1]

[1]The actual names of the districts have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Chapter 2

Overview of the Four Districts

Bannister School District was a large urban district of 175 schools, serving a community of over 700,000. Of the 106,500 students, 86% were African-American, and 12% were white. About 17% of the students received special education, and about 70% received free and reduced price meals. The district had 133 schoolwide Title I schools.

The district resided in a state with a strong standards-based reform package that had been in the implementation stage for almost a decade. State standards were linked to a set of state performance indicators, including performance-based assessments and a high school graduation assessment. Student performance on these assessments was used along with other indicators for school accountability. Low-performing schools could be subject to state intervention and even takeover.

Hanley County School District was a rural, county-wide system that served a population of about 44,000. The system enrolled 7,500 students in 13 schools. About 90% of the students were white, and 9% were African-American. About 40% of the students received free and reduced price meals, and 7% received special education.

This district was also in a state with a high-profile standards-based educational reform package. State content and performance standards and a comprehensive set of assessments were driving school-level changes. Accountability for schools was grounded in the assessment results and involved both sanctions and rewards. During the time of the research, this system was one of about 20% of all districts in the state recognized for its high level of performance.

Doyle County School District was a suburban county system that had one of the highest growth rates in the state. Over 24,000 students were served in the public schools at the time of the study, but over 2,000 new students were enrolling each year. There were 28 schools and three charter schools operating at the time of the study; nine new schools were scheduled to open in the following three years. About 92% of the student population was white, 4% was Hispanic, and 3% was Asian. Special education students comprised 8% of the student population, while fewer than 1% of students were Title I-eligible and 2% received free and reduced price meals.

The county had been implementing a comprehensive set of interrelated reforms

since the early 1990s. They began with a mission to support a World Class 2000 set of goals. Standards and a package of comprehensive assessments were being developed by teams of teachers. These were used for school accountability as well as to guide professional development and a pay-for-performance compensation plan within the district.

State-level reforms included a set of standards and assessments that were just beginning to be implemented at the time of this research. The first assessment results in two content areas had been reported for schools and districts. The state reforms struck a balance between establishing a core set of performance expectations for schools while also encouraging and supporting a great deal of local district autonomy and development. School choice, particularly charter schools, was a major feature of the state reforms.

Watertown School District was a small, affluent, independent school district with 12 comprehensive schools and about 5,000 students, of whom 94% were white, 2% were African-American, and 2% were Hispanic. About 12% of the students were identified as needing special education and related services; over 1% of these came from outside of the district on tuition. About 13.5% of the students received free and reduced price meals.

The district had a long history of supporting public education and existed in a state with a tradition of local control. Students' test scores were among the highest in the state, and the district had been recognized in several surveys as the "best" district in the state. About 85% of all graduates enrolled in full- or part-time higher education.

Reform initiatives were almost totally locally driven. The district embraced "outcomes-based education" (OBE) and defined nine exit outcomes required for graduation. These were linked to K-12 standards and a system of assessments that included standardized norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests and portfolios. Much of the emphasis on assessments was at the teacher level. The focus was on helping teachers develop and use assessments to guide instruction rather than to establish any high-stakes accountability. High school students were required to construct portfolios to demonstrate mastery of the outcomes before receiving a diploma. However, at the time of this research, schools exercised a great deal of support and flexibility in enforcing this requirement to ensure that all students would graduate.

The state had developed a set of curricular frameworks in content areas that serve as de facto standards, but there was no state assessment. The state did require districts, as part of the state's accreditation process, to assess specific aspects of the curriculum using assessments that the district selects.

District Name and Type	
Bannister	Large, urban district
Doyle County	Large, county-wide suburban district
Watertown	Small, independent suburban district
Hanley County	Rural, county-wide district

Chapter 3
The Study

During the 1997-98 school year, a team of researchers visited each of the four districts and conducted classroom observations and interviews with special and general education teachers and principals. The percentages of special education students and the percentages of students receiving free and reduced price meals in each of the four districts are displayed on pages 10 and 11. In each district, two elementary and one middle school were selected for the in-depth study. In general, the schools included in the study reflected the demographic characteristics of their respective districts. The schools were selected based on recommendations of school district administrators and information from the case studies. Since we had established relationships with district administrators during our research in Phase I, we were able to call and talk to the persons in the district (e.g., special education director, assistant superintendent for accountability) most likely to have the information needed to recommend schools appropriate for this second phase of our research.

We asked the district administrators to recommend elementary schools that they perceived as moving forward well in implementing standards-based reform, as it had been defined either by the state or district. We also asked them to make sure the elementary schools they recommended had a representative group of students that included those with high-incidence (mild) and low-incidence (severe) disabilities. The elementary schools they chose did not have to have fully inclusive programs; the schools could use self-contained classes for students with disabilities. In guiding the district administrators' recommendations for middle schools, we were not as concerned with the special education population issue, since these schools had many children with either mild or severe disabilities. We did ask the administrators to look more closely for middle schools they perceived as being far along in implementing standards-based reform.

From the beginning of Phase I, our research had focused on elementary and middle schools. The instrument we employed to gather data was developed for use in elementary and middle schools for the *Congress to Classrooms* project (Wilson and Floden, 1997). This instrument would not have been applicable to high school organization and curriculum, so we did not include high schools in our research.

In each elementary school, researchers observed a reading/language arts and a math

Percentages of Students Receiving Special Education Services by District

Bannister School District

Hanley School District

Doyle School District

Watertown School District

lesson at the primary (grades 1-3) and upper elementary (grades 4-5 and sometimes 6) levels. At the middle school, an English/reading class and a math class were observed at grades 6 and 8. Observers used a systematic observation procedure developed by Wilson and Floden (1997). Classrooms were selected that had at least three students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Interviews were conducted with the general education teachers who led the specific lesson observed and the special educator who was responsible for the student(s) with disabilities in that particular class. Principals in each school were interviewed, as were the district special education directors. A total of 28 classroom observations were conducted, and 60 individuals were interviewed.

What Did We Find?

Descriptions of each of the districts are presented separately below. This is followed by a discussion of crosscutting themes and issues.

Doyle County

Over the four years that the reforms in Doyle County have been followed, the district has evolved toward greater accountability for student performance on assessments. The district had a strong standards-based reform focus, and administrators and teachers were aware of the concept of standards and were integrally involved in creating a body of assessments that could be used to measure student achievement. However, with the advent of the state assessments and performance reports, the schools had a new intensity regarding improving student learning. Everyone had become more aware of their school's state test scores and the areas that needed improvement.

Curriculum and Standards. Teachers remained very involved in writing standards and

in translating them into assessments. The district standards guided instruction in the observed classrooms, and teachers discussed why they taught certain concepts or subjects in terms of the standards or assessment results. Teachers felt more comfortable with the language arts standards than with math. They felt that those standards were more consistent with their former instructional practices than math, which caused them to "stretch" and learn new content and pedagogy.

The language arts standards were grounded in a whole language approach. Teachers at both elementary and middle schools were concerned about the number of poor readers. Principals in the target schools were also concerned that reading was an area in need of the most improvement on their assessments. Special education teachers provided phonics instruction to almost all students with mild to moderate disabilities. The middle schools had recently added reading teachers who would provide phonemic instruction to low-achieving general education readers.

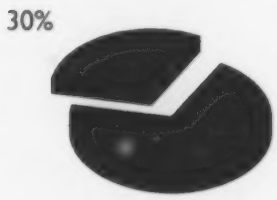
Instructional Materials. Every classroom had a variety of materials, including a number of textbooks, reference materials, and trade books. Each classroom had at least two student computer work stations. The elementary classrooms had many manipulatives, games, and other instructional materials. Student work—written as well as constructed projects—were evident in all schools and classrooms.

Teachers felt very supported in their classrooms and believed they had the materials they needed. They also felt that they had strong professional development that is integrated with standards and assessment development.

Instruction. Teachers used a combination of whole group and small group instruction in each lesson observed. Teachers also were generally very able to discuss student perfor-

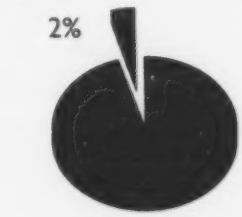
Percentages of Students Receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals by District

Bannister School District



Hanley School District

Doyle School District



Watertown School District

mance levels and instructional needs. The classroom assessments provided teachers with sound knowledge of students' abilities.

Students with Disabilities. Students with disabilities were expected to participate in the standards and state and local assessments in all accountability reports. The district had always had clear expectations that students with disabilities would be included in general education classrooms and standards and assessments. The district was also an early participant in the statewide systems change initiative. Special and general education teachers had collaborated in developing assessments and still actively collaborated to provide students with disabilities access to the general education standards and curriculum. Special education teachers had been represented on all of the standards development teams, but fewer of the individual teachers had engaged in these activities or in activities related to developing assessments.

Classroom observations revealed a wide array of accommodations and curriculum modifications for students with varying disabilities, as well as for students deemed to be at risk academically. Students with disabilities almost always used different textbooks and often different materials (e.g., handouts and other teacher-made materials). However, worksheets and handouts were frequently modified "on the spot" for a particular student with a disability.

General and special education teachers had a good grasp of the needs and general performance levels of students with disabilities, based on their experience with the student. They used few formal or systematic assessments. However, the district's use of portfolios and emphasis on demonstrating student achievement in multiple ways favored the students with disabilities. Teachers felt that students with disabilities had more opportunity to demonstrate what they knew in those districts that used several measures that allowed students to show what they had learned. In contrast, since the state assessments were a single assessment, the teachers were somewhat frustrated or confused regarding what they perceived as differences in the performance of students on different types of assessments.

General education teachers, in most cases, planned the specific lessons and activities. Special educators worked with the teacher or, at the middle school, with the grade-level team, to identify modifications and instructional strategies for individual students with disabilities. These adjustments were idiosyncratic to an individual student and not part of a larger curriculum plan. However, in almost every observed lesson, the instructions, tasks, and handouts were interpreted, paraphrased, or modified at the time of instruction. Sometimes a special educator designed a specific activity or lesson for the entire group that branched to differential skill instruction for the lower-performing students.

Classroom instruction frequently included small group work time, and students with IEPs and Section 504 accommodation plans, as well as other "at-risk" students, tended to be grouped together. Teachers always called on these students and encouraged their participation, but these students rarely responded. Instruction was almost always delivered and mediated by adults; there were few instances of peer "helpers." Adults included general and special education teachers, para-educators, and parent volunteers. These individuals were used flexibly, moving in and out of a classroom as needed. Their focus, however, was always on the lower-performing quarter of the class. The classroom teacher also spent the majority of his or her "floating" time keeping the low-performing students on task, re-teaching, and/or giving corrective feedback. No one was ignored or left behind intentionally. However, there was a sense among general education teachers that they were almost in an uphill struggle trying to help every student learn the particular skills or concepts.

Teachers shared a strong sense of professional respect and community. They also felt an explicit sense of shared responsibility for students on IEPs and those with mild learning and behavior problems. For those students with more severe learning problems, including those with mental retardation, general educators were clearly in a supportive role, while special educators were designing the "curriculum" and instruction. For these students, the focus was on participation in an inclusive classroom, not on designing a program based on a long-range concept of a scope and sequence of skills and knowledge.

Hanley County

Little has changed in this system during the past four years in terms of the reform structure. The state standards and assessments dominated the discussions within the schools, and teachers and administrators offered mixed reviews. Teachers of both general and special education supported the notion of a common set of content standards. They perceived these as unifying the school and setting high expectations for each student. However, in the same interview, teachers spoke very harshly about the state assessments. The results of these assessments were used to hold schools accountable and determined both sanctions and monetary rewards. Improving assessment results monopolized the attention of the schools. The stakes were perceived to be very high.

Teachers resented the attention given to the assessments and the pressure they felt they were under to improve results. They spoke of the assessments as "not valid," "too subjective," "not realistic," and "demeaning to teachers" because the tests did not acknowledge teachers' own knowledge of students and their instructional needs.

Curriculum and Standards. The curriculum for the district was aligned with the state standards. The state has provided guidelines and numerous professional development opportunities to help schools and teachers translate the state standards into actual curriculum. Teachers at both elementary and junior high schools were well aware of the standards and what was to be taught. Teachers at the grade levels where assessments were administered were considered most familiar with what knowledge and skills students were expected to master. The elementary schools appeared to be much further along in implementing the standards, particularly the requirements for multi-disciplinary instruction.

The emphasis on improving student performance was evident in a whole school approach to improvement. School planning was grounded in test scores but also included goals generated by school staff and parents. All resources were targeted at the same set of goals, and professional development had a common focus based on the school goals, which teachers generally endorsed.

At the upper elementary and junior high school levels, there were concerns about the lack of what teachers called "fundamental skills," specifically reading and math computation. Teachers didn't necessarily blame this on state standards as much as on the instruction at the lower grade levels. However, they steadfastly believed that students must master the fundamental or basic literacy skills before they could engage in the types of higher-level problem solving required by the state assessments. They believed that teachers at the primary levels were not concerned enough about what students would be expected to do on the assessments at later grade levels and thus spent too much time on "developmentally appropriate" instruction and not enough time on skill acquisition. Junior high school teachers felt that they must pay for what the elementary schools had ignored and that students who came to them were too deficient in basic skills to ever master the curriculum.

Instructional Materials. The elementary classrooms had a wealth of materials, including numerous computers. Junior high school classes were more traditional and used far fewer computers or other technologies. Classes had multiple text, reference, and trade books. Teachers used many manipulatives and other teacher-made worksheets. Almost every general education teacher relied on a textbook to "check" skill sequences and specific concepts (e.g., grammar, math concepts).

Instruction. Hanley County had much more variability in instruction across classrooms. Primary teachers were implementing a multi-age, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Among the two such classrooms observed, one teacher engaged in much more directive skill instruction, while the other teacher employed a totally student-directed, center-based method. However, parents of students in the latter classroom had complained about the lack of spelling instruction, so the teacher was reluctantly using a spelling book to teach basic rules.

The schools shared a major emphasis on improving instruction, and schools were adopting one particular model for differentiated instruction. As one teacher said, "There is a big push on 'how'—not 'what'—to teach." Teachers spoke of working constantly to learn new strategies to improve learning.

Elementary instruction was a mix of whole group and small group configurations. Teachers used some paired instruction and a few cooperative learning groups. Teachers at the junior high school levels used much more teacher-directed learning involving teacher lecture and independent seat work than at the elementary school. Teachers at all grade levels generally taught a concept, checked for learning through informal questioning, gave individual or small group assignments, and floated among students, checking work and doing a minimum of re-teaching or redirecting.

By and large, teachers assessed student learning through traditional but informal means, such as looking at assignments and questioning students. Teachers felt that they had a good grasp of what students needed and what they should teach through their own judgments. Yet several teachers spoke of being surprised by how one or more of their students performed on the state assessment, when they "knew" the student's performance levels from their own experience. No teacher was using a structured or systematic daily or weekly standardized assessment to gauge progress.

Parent Involvement. Teachers often spoke of the need to increase "student motivation." They expressed frustration about the gradual disengagement in learning across grade levels among many students. They also spoke often about the number of students with "emotional and behavior issues." Teachers believed that parents needed to be more involved and that their involvement would motivate students. However, the teachers did not know how to engage many of the parents, whom they saw as preoccupied with economic, marital, or other personal issues.

Students with Disabilities. Special education students were expected to fully participate in the assessments, and their scores were included in the schools' accountability indices. The state reforms had always explicitly included students with IEPs and Section 504 accommodation plans. In addition, the county had been part of a statewide systems change project focused on inclusion for a number of years. Inclusion of students with disabilities had been supported by all teachers and considered a "given." Yet most of the responsibility for teaching these students rested squarely with special education teachers and/or para-educators.

General and special education teachers had frequent, often daily, scheduled opportunities for planning and collaboration. But both

groups of teachers indicated that general education teachers made all or most of the decisions about daily lessons and activities, and special education teachers made the "adaptations" to activities and materials for individual students. Further, implementing instructional modifications fell to the special educator or para-educator in each classroom. Instruction was organized and followed a definite plan. Apparently, teachers made very little ad hoc lesson modification for students with disabilities. In a few instances, general education teachers questioned what their special education colleagues were teaching special education students, with the teachers' concerns focused on the extensive use of repetition and drill. However, the general educators said they deferred to their colleagues as the "experts."

Special education teachers "classified" their students in terms of how they could enter into a general education class. Those needing no assistance meant that they required no accommodations or modifications. In most cases, if modifications were required in the classrooms, para-educators were assigned to individual students and engaged in either para-phrasing or assisting the students in completing individual tasks. These tended to be students with moderate or severe disabilities who were working on assignments that were only loosely related to what the class was doing. Special education teachers floated and assisted any student that needed help. In only one instance did a general and special education teacher share responsibility for designing lessons.

In one grade-level team at the junior high school, all students with IEPs and all low-achieving regular education students were placed in the same English and math classes, resulting in 13 students with IEPs in one class. Both general and special education teachers believed that this allowed them to better target the needs of students and slow down the pace of instruction.

Special education teachers at the upper elementary and junior high school levels expressed frustration about the performance standards of the state assessments, as well as with the content that students were expected to learn. Special education teachers felt that the "high expectations" were good but that the content was not relevant or achievable. They believed that they were in a better position to know what their students needed to learn. However, they often confused the demands for inclusion in general education classes with the state content standards, believing that if they had more separate classes or "pull-out," they could teach more functional or life-oriented skills.

Bannister School District

This urban school district operated in a state that had been implementing standards and performance assessments for over a decade. In addition, for over two decades, the state had a "minimum competency" test, consisting of four subtests, administered as part of the high school graduation requirements of individual local education agencies. The state reforms included school performance report cards, and low-performing schools could be subjected to sanctions, including reconstitution. Schools that made substantial improvements in student performance could receive cash rewards.

Teachers in this school district were all familiar with the state assessments and with the possible sanctions. The vast majority of schools within the state that had been determined to be eligible for reconstitution were in this district. Therefore, the threat of sanctions for low performance had been instilled in teachers.

Standards and Curriculum. Teachers of both general and special education said that they taught to the test and that the state assessments influenced their instruction more than any other factor, although teachers at the middle school level were more concerned about the high

school assessment than the newer state performance assessment. Teachers appeared to accept teaching to the test as an established fact. They were neither resentful nor particularly enthusiastic. Most teachers supported the state standards and their requirements for "higher-level" and "abstract" thinking. They believed that the skills required by the standards would be necessary for their students to be competitive in the future. Yet all were concerned about the large numbers of students whom they believed would not meet the performance standards.

Teachers were worried that many of their students lacked the general language skills, specifically basic reading skills and vocabulary, to do well on the tests. Elementary teachers in particular wanted the state assessments to include some "more basic" items, such as traditional reading comprehension questions or math word problems. They felt that their students did poorly because they could not even understand the directions for a task required on the assessment.

The district did have a curriculum that was considered to be "more or less" aligned with the state standards and assessments. The district had been moving to adopt a standard basal reader and math text. At the middle school, the curriculum was entirely on-line, and teachers could access the curricular goals as well as sample lessons and activities on a computer. Teachers said that they relied on the district curriculum. However, most were also very dependent on a textbook for guidance with lesson plans and used the end-of-unit tests for ongoing assessment of progress.

Instruction and Materials. Teachers said that they "were told what to teach" by the district and/or their principal. The two elementary schools each had adopted various instructional programs or interventions, such as an integrated language arts (ILA) program, a specific math program, and a hands-on science program. Most of these programs were "packaged" and came with books and materials, instructional objectives and strategies, and even lesson plans. Teachers were told to post the objectives and were expected to strictly follow the program. Teachers were also directed to display the state standards, assessment rubrics, or other specific assessment-related vocabulary in their classrooms.

Instruction was mostly teacher-driven and extremely variable. Several teachers were well versed in the subject matter they were teaching and organized an integrated lesson. Other observed lessons were relatively superficial and seemed to have little purpose. At the middle school, three of the teachers responsible for math and science instruction were uncertified and had recently come to the classroom from jobs outside of education.

In general, the standard lesson included teachers lecturing and then providing a worksheet for individual seat work. Group work was limited to the primary grades and consisted of completing individual worksheets related to the lesson. The classes used little technology, and students engaged in mostly paper-and-pencil tasks. Teachers felt that they needed many more materials to assist them with instruction. However, their biggest concern was lack of motivation and focus. Teachers believed that more interesting materials might help engage students in learning. Teachers used their own observations of student work to assess progress. All said that they used portfolios and assessments from textbooks. One elementary school used a commercial test to "screen" students to determine who needed additional help in reading and language arts.

Professional Development. Teachers cited their colleagues as their best source of ideas and information about how to teach. The state assessments and "the district and my

principal" determined what they would teach. General education teachers felt that they had sufficient professional development opportunities offered in their schools or districts. Several of those interviewed were also enrolled in courses at local colleges and universities.

Students with Disabilities. The state expected students with disabilities to participate in the state assessments, with very few exceptions. Thus, special education teachers were aware of the assessment requirements and standards. Special education teachers said that they familiarized themselves with the assessments by looking at what general education teachers at their students' grade levels were teaching and then would "go to a lower level." In most cases, this translated to getting a textbook at a primary grade level and using that as a guide for instruction. However, teachers supplemented texts with their own activities. Special education teachers all indicated that, while they must be guided by the state standards, they "must teach to the IEP." The IEP goals were supposedly aligned with the state standards but were usually focused on very basic skills. But because the goals might have addressed reading or math, special education teachers perceived that they were addressing the state standards.

Special education teachers uniformly did not believe that their students could meet the state standards. However, teacher frustration or resentment was low. Two teachers believed that it was unfair to subject the students to these standards and probably unfair to them as teachers. Only one teacher questioned the relevancy of the standards, saying that most of her students would probably not graduate and would need work-related skills, not academic skills.

Special education occurred in special classrooms; students with IEPs who were in general education classes were given the same assignments and expectations as their peers. General education teachers checked on these students' work during individual seat work time, but there were usually a number of students who required assistance, so IEP students received little or no focused assistance in the general education classrooms. Special and general education teachers met informally to discuss individual student progress. Two schools had structured planning time, but teachers said this was rarely used for teacher consultation.

Watertown School District

This school district had been steadily implementing its outcomes-based education plan. The district had developed its own standards and assessments and had begun implementation at the high school level. The system's goals, standards, and indicators had gradually moved downward, and all teachers were aware of the student requirements. Teachers had been very involved with developing curricular frameworks based on the outcomes and indicators and shared a general sense of ownership and endorsement of the outcomes.

Standards and Curriculum. The district had a cohesive curriculum that reflected its outcomes, standards, and indicators. Teachers were uniformly aware of and capable of implementing that curriculum. The district had high expectations for students. However, because the state did not require that a specific assessment be administered and the system was very collegial and supportive of staff, teachers felt that they had a great deal of professional freedom to interpret the standards. Teachers perceived that they had participated in developing standards and assessments. They also had an extensive introduction to standards through state efforts to develop math and science standards and an early literacy initiative. A number of this district's teachers served on state-level committees that had developed standards and/or new instructional initiatives.

As a result, teachers were very conversant and comfortable with the concept of standards.

The teachers also had an abundance of professional development, specifically related to instruction in reading and math, as these subjects in particular had incorporated new pedagogical approaches along with new content. Thus, they came to implement standards through a "bottom-up" approach.

Instruction and Materials. The teachers in Watertown were very skilled and worked in a supportive and collegial environment. Instruction focused on ensuring that subject matter was integrated and technology was used extensively. At the elementary level, teachers tended to use a variety of groupings, and learning was generally student-directed. At both the elementary and middle school levels, textbooks were used as guides for skill sequences but were supplemented by a variety of other trade books, materials, and software. Teachers collaborated and team-taught and appeared very supportive of each other. Differentiated instruction was evident within classrooms and also through instructional groupings at the middle school level.

Students with Disabilities. The district had a long history of supporting special education students and had a very inclusive philosophy. Thus, very few students were educated outside of general education classrooms for any period of time. Special and general educators collaborated and team-taught, and numerous para-educators were also available in the schools to assist in instruction of special education students. All special personnel were used very flexibly across classrooms to support individual students. The district had strong expectations that students with disabilities would participate in the district curriculum and be held accountable for achieving the outcomes. However, due to the flexibility and small size of the district—as well as the use of portfolio assessments, which provided opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of standards in various ways—students with disabilities rarely "failed." Even students who participated in community-based programs received diplomas.

However, both special and general education teachers voiced concerns about the level or intellectual demands of the content they were teaching and the pace of instruction. They saw many students with disabilities falling further and further behind; they also saw other students who needed more and more help in foundation skills, repetition, and re-teaching. At the middle school, a reading class had been established specifically to improve basic skills (e.g., vocabulary and fluency) of a number of students. The math teachers wanted to add similar basic classes for students who were struggling in that content area.

General and special educators structured co-planning time and worked very collaboratively. They also had extensive professional development. They were given a great deal of professional discretion regarding how best to structure their collaboration and instruction. Teachers tended to collaborate around the curriculum as opposed to around the placement of a student. They worked very hard to ensure that the students with disabilities had access to the curriculum and instruction, using different materials and more intensive instruction as necessary.

Chapter 4

General Observations about Schools and Classrooms

Much has been written about how teachers interpret and implement new curricular standards and assessments and how they respond to new accountability demands. While this specific study was not about the overall interpretation of standards-based reform, it was inevitable that any observations concerning special education and standards-based reform would be couched within the overall culture of reform in a given school. Therefore, information about how teachers in general were interpreting new demands for more rigorous content and higher expectations for student achievement were important background to our findings about special education teachers and students.

Teacher Ownership

Over the four years that we studied the four local districts, we observed distinctly different "degrees" of ownership of the new reforms among teachers. The differences between districts were more marked than variations within a single district. For example, the two districts that had developed their own standards and assessments—pre-dating any state-level efforts—had almost universal acceptance of the standards among those teachers that we observed and interviewed. That is not to say that teachers were not somewhat ambivalent about how realistic some of the standards might be in terms of the level and breadth of content. But those teachers in "home-grown" districts generally understood the standards and endorsed their value in terms of setting high expectations for students and focusing their own instruction. They could clearly demonstrate the link between the standards and their own classroom practices.

Perhaps the most salient factor associated with this degree of ownership was the involvement of teachers in writing standards and in designing assessments. These activities occurred to some degree in all four of the study districts. Yet they were more intense and extensive in the "home-grown" districts. Being part of the program from the beginning appeared to have made a difference in how comfortable and conversant teachers were about standards. These teachers were able to describe specific expectations for their students and to identify how their teaching related to the standards.

The Importance of Professional Development

Professional development, in the form of intensive engagement in translating standards into actual classroom lessons, was the most influential factor cited by teachers in the implementation of reforms. All teachers reported receiving "a lot" of professional development in this area, and yet differences were observed across districts. Doyle County had the most comprehensive professional development program, which was almost totally aligned with the standards and assessments. The district invested resources and supports in local schools to help teachers align curriculum, develop assessments, and otherwise work together to translate standards into daily classroom operations. Watertown provided extensive professional development opportunities for teachers, many of which were related to the district outcomes and instructional objectives. However, identifying the relationship among the factors leading to this district's educational outcomes was not necessarily straightforward. Whereas the district had provided many opportunities for teachers to learn new approaches to early language literacy, as well as math and science instruction, this professional development improved the district's outcomes but did not result from direct efforts to raise test scores. The district was focused on good teaching at high levels of learning, and the outcomes and assessments were one of many initiatives supporting—but not driving—teacher practice. Perhaps as a result, during observations and interviews, teachers in Doyle County and Watertown exhibited the most comfort with teaching to standards or outcomes.

The remaining two districts—Hanley County and Bannister—evidenced a much more centralized approach to professional development. Activities were direct attempts to provide either specific models of instruction or strategies that were directly linked to their respective state standards. Nonetheless, these two districts remained apart in the degree to which professional development activities, such as those directed at implementing a new model of instruction, were systemic (i.e., whole school events versus episodic workshops). Despite differences in approaches, however, all teachers valued and sought more assistance, particularly in how to differentiate instruction to help all students meet the new standards.

The "Treadmill Effect"... Faster and Faster and More and More

Perhaps the most overriding concern expressed by teachers across all four districts was how to deliver these standards and meet the new expectations with ***all*** students. Indeed, the need for strategies for the students who were struggling dominated the conversations with teachers about standards and assessments. As reported in our earlier monograph, teachers considered that new curricular reforms, such as standards, were clashing with the available instructional time. Teachers reported having to teach more concepts, skills, and processes during a semester or school year, the result being an ever increasing pace of instruction that left little time for re-teaching or catching up slower students.

The classroom observations and interviews conducted as part of the present study offered a picture that might be described as an instructional treadmill. Teachers at all levels, but particularly at the upper elementary and middle school grades, appeared to almost struggle to get all students to grasp a concept in a lesson. Regrouping for small group instruction and extensive "ad hoc" re-teaching during individual seat work time were two predominant strategies the teachers used to help students.

Differentiation of instruction—such as using a variety of groups, different texts, worksheets or materials, or use of other adults or peers as tutors or instructors—varied across grade levels and districts. One district evidenced almost no differentiation at any grade level; observed instruction was overwhelmingly didactic and teacher-directed and was followed by individual seat work. Classrooms in other districts generally followed a pattern where approximately 60% of the lesson time was devoted to teacher-led whole group explanation/demonstration; in the remaining time, students worked in small ability groupings, including pairs and even sometimes individually. During this time, the general education teacher and other adults, including special education teachers, aides, and an occasional parent volunteer, moved around the groups checking and re-teaching. Our observations revealed that almost three-quarters of this teacher time was devoted to helping students try to grasp the lesson that had been taught.

The sense that teachers were trying to bolster, push, and otherwise support the students who were having difficulty was reinforced by teacher interviews about the lesson. Teachers spoke, sometimes with a good deal of frustration, about specific students who did not understand the material or forgot what they had been taught the day before. Despite this, none of the teachers said that they would teach the lesson again or move off of their instructional path. An important perception of these interviews was the sense of urgency, of pushing and pulling students, that seemed more pronounced in the districts that had state-imposed assessments and standards. In these districts, teachers appeared more concerned about making sure that students learned what they needed for a particular assessment at a particular grade.

More than others, middle school teachers were acutely aware of individual students' learning difficulties. They spoke of the pace of instruction and how certain students could not keep up. They generally attributed the students' learning problems to the lack of good "foundational skills," which they were not well able to articulate. Middle school teachers interviewed in three of the districts believed that many of the "failures" they saw were due to permissive elementary schools that, in their view, placed no emphasis on making sure students mastered the critical skills.

Nonetheless, almost all teachers at both levels said that they could not slow down the pace of instruction.

Colleagues, Friends: The Ultimate Support

While teachers considered professional development to be a crucial element of implementing standards-based reforms, colleagues were the number one support cited by almost every teacher interviewed. Teachers looked to each other for new ideas for lessons and for help with students who were having difficulties. Newer teachers relied on experienced teachers for informal mentoring. In all but one of the districts, special and general education teachers increasingly relied on each other for help in differentiating instruction and interpreting the general education curriculum for students with IEPs or other learning problems.

Teachers trusted other teachers to understand their situation and particular curricular demands. They also expressed the need for immediate or timely assistance with problems that only another staff person in the school could provide. Central supervisors or administrators were valued but "take too long to get back to teachers." The two elements that appeared most important to facilitating collegial support were opportunities for teachers to meet and to trust each other. In terms of planning time and teacher meeting opportuni-

ties, three districts provided these elements as part of the teachers' daily schedule and appeared to have a strong expectation that teachers would collaborate.

Building trust, particularly between a general and special educator, seemed the more elusive of the two elements to achieve. Teachers who were interviewed spoke in terms of how they just got along with or clicked with one another and therefore began to collaborate. They spoke of trusting one another's judgment and input. Sometimes collaboration is forced, however, such as through a requirement to create inclusive classrooms or through the creation of middle school interdisciplinary teams. These appeared to create working relationships, but not always with the ease and confidence that comes from more voluntary collaborations.

These observations were not new revelations concerning the implementation of new reforms, particularly standards and assessments, within classrooms. They did provide a background for the more in-depth analyses of observations and interviews with respect to how students with disabilities were being provided access to the reforms. These findings are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Students with Disabilities

Within the four districts we studied, students with disabilities had been included in the reforms almost from the outset. Three of the districts had a strong district-wide inclusive schools initiative that preceded or was being promoted at the same time as the larger educational reforms. Inclusion was seen as a special education policy reform. Most of the general educators believed that inclusion meant educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms and providing modifications and adaptations to the lessons and broader curriculum that enabled those students to stay in the classrooms and ***make some progress.***

During our initial site visits, neither general nor special educators tended to speak of the need for students with disabilities to demonstrate high levels of achievement on specific assessments. The challenges associated with inclusion of students with disabilities were more often seen as a lack of adequate supports provided in the general education classroom and, not infrequently, confusion on the part of general educators as to what exactly the students with disabilities were supposed to learn in the classroom. However, as noted in our earlier monograph, even during the first visits, both general and special educators spoke of the unifying nature of standards and how they create a common language and road map for instruction.

By the end of the fourth year of study, the conversation about standards had changed. All teachers and principals were acutely aware of the need for higher test scores on the part of almost every student. Accountability for results was the focus of the schools, and teachers knew that students with all but the most significant disabilities were expected to be part of the accountability equation. There was a shift from the presence and participation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms to an expectation that the students must learn what was being taught because they would be tested on that curriculum and their scores would matter to the school. This shift generally created a sense of urgency and various degrees of frustration among teachers about how to accomplish this difficult task. The findings regarding how teachers were interpreting the new demands are categorized in two broad areas: determining the focus of instruction for students with disabilities and determining the locus of responsibility of instruction.

Determining the Focus of Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Deciding what to teach students with disabilities was, until recently, often an ad hoc process that was strongly shaped by each student's IEP. For students with mild disabilities, the general assumption was that they would follow the curriculum of the general classroom, with special instruction, remediation, or support provided by special education. ***Where*** the special education occurred might differ, but the focus of instruction was biased toward what was happening in general education classrooms. For students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, the prevailing practice was to design goals and objectives that reflected more functional or life-important skills and either teach those in the community or in inclusive classrooms. In the latter instance, the individualized skills were integrated into more traditional instructional blocks. The expectations about levels of performance for the students were individual, at least in the area requiring special education, and set by special educators in an often uneasy negotiation between general and special educators.

In the four case study districts, the process of deciding what to teach has been profoundly altered. Both general and special educators looked to the assessments and the larger performance expectations set by the curricular standards to guide what happens in the classroom. This focus had become more pronounced over the time we visited the district. The IEPs of students observed during site visits, for the most part, addressed specific skills that were deficient. Yet the scope and sequence of the general education curriculum guided the ongoing daily instructional planning.

Special educators tended to view their job as "catching up" students or otherwise fitting them into the general classroom instruction. Yet a major theme among the special education teachers was the lack of basic skills, such as phonics or computation, among students with disabilities. The teachers on all levels, but specifically in upper elementary and middle school grades, believed that this lack prevented the students from learning more complex material and that in fact more complex instruction should not be attempted until basic skills were remediated. While teachers most often cited the lack of basic reading and math literacy, they also acknowledged that students did not have good strategies for problem solving, had memory difficulties, and were not independent learners.

When faced with these skill deficits, special educators were working on two fronts. On the one hand, they were trying to support the students in the ongoing classroom instruction by rephrasing, reinforcing, and generally providing practice in the classroom and in pull-out settings. On the other hand, they were also providing direct instruction to fill skill gaps. The vignettes on the facing page demonstrate the hazards inherent in balancing these two fronts.

These vignettes point to the difficulties in determining what to teach students with disabilities and when to move away from the curriculum versus when to individualize instruction. This issue, which we termed "Competing Priorities" in our earlier monograph, became even more acute as the consequences attached to assessments and accountability mechanisms grew more significant. This decision-making was complicated by the lack of precise assessments of a student's performance in the general education curriculum and by the special educators' knowledge of what constitutes the "curriculum."

Most of the teachers, both of general and special education, were relying on the state and/or district assessments and some combination of their own instructional assessments to determine what a child knew and was learning.

Classroom Vignettes

In a fifth-grade classroom, the teacher is presenting a lesson on Egypt and the pyramids. In this class of 23 students are four students with IEPs. Each student has a worksheet with a passage to read followed by questions to be answered. The questions have been modified for the students with IEPs. The lesson addresses several of the state standards in history as well as reading. The teacher leads a lively discussion with the entire class using guided questioning. Then students break into four discussion groups to read the passage and answer the questions as a group. The students with IEPs participate in the whole class instruction, but during independent seat work a general education teacher, an aide, and peers support the individual students. Groups are then re-formed for direct skill instruction. The students with IEPs and one other student requiring remediation meet as a group with the special education teacher, who does a lesson on the questions "Who, What, When, and Why" pertaining to the pyramids. Among the four students on IEPs, one is basically a non-reader, and the other three are about two to three years below level. All have difficulty paying attention and have poor memory and organization. One student has significant behavior difficulties and is "on and off" medication. Each child is seen separately by the special education teacher about three or four times a week for intensive instruction in reading as well as learning strategies.

In an elementary school, a group of primary-level teachers, two special education teachers, and a special education aide move in and out of rooms during a morning block of instruction involving reading, math, and science. Among the first- and second-graders are several students with language delays, a student with mental retardation, and a student with autism. The students with disabilities spend the entire time in the class. These students sometimes work on very different tasks than their peers and sometimes are given the same assignment but are heavily assisted by the special education aide. The special education teachers are focused on maintaining the students in the inclusive setting and providing instruction that is appropriate to the student's developmental level. Sometimes the tasks look alike (such as using the same worksheet) but require very different responses (e.g., some students identify states on a colored map, while others use the map to name colors). Often the tasks require more manipulations and appear to be more focused on building basic language skills. Yet for these students—who would likely participate in an alternate assessment—there was little concern about keeping them in or aligned with the general education curriculum. For those students with less marked cognitive disabilities, however, the background concerns were always on getting students ready for the assessment. Yet goals for these students remained very basic.

In a middle school, a group of 15 students meet in a special reading class with an eighth-grade English teacher, a special education teacher, and a special education aide. About half of these students have IEPs. In this special class, which is scheduled in addition to their regular English class, the students get extra instruction in reading and language arts. The teachers on the eighth-grade team recognized that these 15 students needed more reinforcement to improve their literacy skills, so they created this special section and built it into the students' schedules. Because the section is so heavily staffed, the instruction can be much more individualized. The teachers and aide use truly diverse instructional strategies that support improvements in the students' literacy skills both in terms of connecting to the general education curriculum and achieving standards addressed in the regular English class. During their time in the special reading class, the students might work one-on-one with the aide as they write reports at the computer, analyze and discuss in small groups the same literature that their general education classmates are reading, or tackle more traditional skill-building exercises.

Frequently, when it came to making decisions about students with disabilities, there was a mismatch; that is, their daily performance in class did not conform to their test scores. In one district, test scores in writing were much higher than teachers' observed performance. In two other districts, special education teachers expressed frustration that "their" students really did know more than their test scores indicated. In all instances, the teachers felt that they did not have adequate data on the real performance of their students and what they knew.

General classroom assessments were not diagnostic. Instead, they indicated that a student did not learn specific material, but were neither precise nor thorough enough to focus instructional remediation for individual students. Thus, the general education teachers used a "catch-all" phrase of lack of "foundational skills" to indicate student learning problems, though this seemed to refer to general learning difficulties indicating a lack of basic subject matter knowledge or facts, as well as more generalized problems with learning. Special education teachers, on the other hand, tended to approach the upcoming assessments through a task-analytic and hierarchical process. That is, if the student was doing poorly in reading and writing, or in math, the teachers looked at all of the basic skill deficits and focused on remediating those; they did not spend time on more cognitively complex instruction.

Special educators rarely analyzed the larger curricular goals and the standards to determine the concepts or broad learnings expected. There was also little evidence of long-term goal setting across the scope and sequence of the curriculum. Special education teachers interpreted the week-to-week lessons and units as the goal, and their job was to move the students along as best they could. Students with disabilities seemed to be caught in classrooms that demanded a variety of increasingly complex thinking, operations, and knowledge. They were prodded and prepared to "fit into" the instruction while also being provided with individualized instruction in rudimentary skills to "catch up."

Determining the Locus of Responsibility

Who decides what special education students should learn is most often determined by the perceived severity of the learning difficulties, often including students' IQ. General educators in almost every one of our school sites expressed feeling responsible for, and at times frustrated with, students who were having learning difficulties. Yet while they looked to special educators for assistance in designing specific lessons or modifying materials for students with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral disorders, they deferred to special educators to plan and implement the instruction for students with more significant disabilities, including any level of mental retardation. The unstated assumption appeared to be that general education's "control" over curriculum shifted when the learning gap was too large.

Neither the goal of "inclusion" nor "universal accountability" appeared to alter the perception that there were certain students whose instructional goals were different enough to require a specialist. For students with moderate or severe cognitive delays, special educators provided specially designed materials, including very different types of worksheets, books, software, and other materials. Frequently, general educators requested that an instructional assistant be assigned to help with these students. During observations, much of the individualized instruction was delivered by these instructional assistants. In a few instances, the general education teacher questioned the efficacy of the instruction and what a student "really was learning." But, for the most part, teachers accepted these students in the classrooms and deferred to special educators to decide what should be taught.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of determining responsibility was the difference among teacher perceptions regarding which students required alternate goals or curricula. Just as special education teachers had an imperfect knowledge of the general education curricular demands, general education teachers expressed a limited understanding of the instructional goals of lower-functioning students. Basically, they believed the goal for these students was to foster social acceptance and inclusiveness. The students were accepted members of the classroom, but the general education teacher served more as monitor and facilitator of activities designed by special educators. Thus, there was little frustration about the students' acquisition of critical content nor concerns about their performance levels on assessments.

On the other hand, the general education curriculum determined instructional goals for students with more "mild" disabilities. While modifications and instructional accommodations might be individualized, rarely were the goals and expected outcomes explicitly discussed or modified. Students with disabilities were expected to learn what was taught as much or as best they could. In only one district did we observe a sort of "instructional triage," where special education and general education teachers "deconstructed" the scope and sequence in special content areas to identify the most important concepts. These were taught explicitly to the students with disabilities using multiple opportunities. Redoing the goals allowed teachers more time to provide the critical instruction.

Creating the Conditions for Access to Reforms

The school and classroom contexts that promoted inclusion of students with disabilities into the reforms were similar to those that have been identified in inclusive schools. They included time for teachers to communicate and collaborate; formal professional development that involved special and general education teachers and resulted in creation of informal learning committees; and a school-wide, if not district-wide, expectation that all students will participate in reforms and have higher achievement. While these factors were the most critical, they were interpreted differently across the four districts. Specific policy guidance with respect to IEP development and assessment accommodations were also useful tools in helping teachers move toward inclusion in reform. In two of the districts where such guidance was provided, it followed the other efforts. In one district, the policies and supports were emerging simultaneously with the implementation of reforms.

Teachers cited time to meet and time to teach as universal concerns. Two districts were implementing alternate calendars to get more time. A third district had extended the school year and was using various intersession programs over scheduled breaks to provide professional development for teachers and more learning opportunities for students.

In three districts, special education teachers were expected to participate in joint professional development, including developing assessments and instructional units or modules that were aligned with standards. These activities provided time to discuss curriculum demands and make explicit expected student performance.

Day-to-day collaboration and planning required more creative use of time. Few teachers used formal daily meetings to do joint planning for individual students. The exception was in middle schools, where grade-level teams met to discuss broad curricular goals and on occasion a specific student.

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Individual planning for most teachers reportedly occurred before or after school and on an "as needed" basis. In all but one instance, the conversations regarding individual students reportedly were centered on how to modify instruction so that a student could "fit into" a lesson. Much of the time used was focused on a day-to-day adaptation of a lesson.

In two districts, the planning and conversations among general and special education teachers were more or less centered on understanding the broader outcomes of a particular unit of instruction. In one school, a special education teacher who supports several fourth- and fifth-grade teachers spoke of "loading up" on planning time at the beginning of each semester so that she truly understood each teacher's semester instructional goals across the various subject matter areas. She could then make individual adaptations and plan individualized instruction with more informal and occasional conversation. Instruction appeared much more individualized.

The districts studied were only beginning to address the alignment of IEP forms and processes with standards. Teachers thought this would help the time issue by clarifying up front what is expected of the student. This would allow special educators to move to more individualized instruction without the need for daily conversations about student progress or the specific purpose of a lesson.

Chapter 6

Summary of Major Themes

The overarching question to be answered by the research was: How are students with disabilities accessing standards-based general education curricula? The results of the in-depth observations and teacher interviews suggest that the answer to the question is still elusive. It is clear that in the districts studied, almost every teacher and every school were aware that all students were expected to participate and learn the content of the general education curriculum. In other words, students were to have access to the general education curriculum. However, exactly what is meant by "access" appeared to differ among teachers and schools and was dependent on a number of conditions, such as the following:

Teacher Ownership and Teacher Knowledge

Both general and special educators needed to understand the knowledge demands of the new content standards and curriculum. They also needed to accept or believe in the purposes and the value of having such standards. Teacher knowledge and ability to incorporate the standards into pedagogy was very much affected by the quality of professional development, as well as the strength of teacher-to-teacher support. Teachers relied on one another to interpret curriculum as well as to help design instruction that leads students to higher levels of learning. Having supportive colleagues was particularly important when faced with the challenge of how to adapt instruction and content for students with disabilities. Special and general educators relied on one another for the information, for problem solving, and for support. This collaboration was particularly critical to special educators, who were struggling to grasp the standards, new curricular frameworks, and the implications for students with disabilities.

Professional development that was focused on integrating specific curricular goals, instruction, and assessment in the standards was most effective in helping teachers understand standards. However, too little professional development focused specifically on helping teachers understand the needs of students with disabilities or other students with significant achievement deficits. The challenge seemed to be how to provide the high-quality professional development directed to teaching and learning as well as to students with significant learning problems.

Understanding Access

A major challenge for both general and special educators was defining "access" to the general education curriculum. Both groups of educators struggled to teach cognitively complex and demanding subject matter content to students who lacked basic "foundational skills." However, it was not always clear what those skills were. While teachers spoke of the lack of basic reading and math literacy, they also alluded to difficulties students had with understanding the concepts and with grasping more complex problems.

Concerns about the lack of basic skills among some students highlighted some of the fundamental perceptions about curriculum and instruction held by both special and general education teachers. For most of the teachers interviewed, curriculum and learning was hierarchical. That is, students were expected to "master" each rung of a ladder of knowledge and skill. The idea that a student who was very deficient in the foundational skills could then master higher levels of knowledge was not well established, particularly among special education teachers. Also not well defined for those teachers was how to accommodate—as opposed to modify—curriculum and instruction. Thus, they were left fighting a two-front battle of remediating basic skills and trying to fit a student into complex subject matter instruction.

What remained ambiguous during the interviews was the degree to which teachers actually believed that a student could learn certain content. Also evident was that teachers rarely, if ever, questioned their own pedagogy or even suggested that a student might not be learning due to less-than-effective instruction. Many teachers "blamed" permissive elementary schools as the source of a child's deficits. Others spoke of unsupportive or dysfunctional families and students who lacked motivation. Not one teacher questioned whether he or she was delivering the content in the best way to meet a student's needs.

For some special educators, the question of relevancy of higher levels of academic subject matter emerged. They questioned whether they were even teaching the right stuff to some of the students. For example, some special educators spoke of the need to teach more functional math or reading, rather than content such as algebra or history. These conversations highlighted some of the underlying tensions within a standards-based system. The notion of common standards, and standards that are almost exclusively academic, conflicted with special educators' views of what some students need, as well as their understanding of curriculum and student learning.

Because of the imperfect understanding of access, special and general educators often focused on making ad hoc modifications to curriculum and instruction and maintaining the student in the general education classroom. These arrangements reflected the confusion or perhaps lack of reflection about the long-term goals and purposes of instruction in specific subject matter. Often it appeared that special educators provided access to the activities in the classroom but not to the ideas.

The "Treadmill" Effect

Teachers perceived that they must cover more subject matter material in the same amount of time. They did not believe that they could focus on the student who needed more intensive support, such as more opportunities to practice and use the new skill or knowledge in a variety of contexts. Special educators attempted to provide these opportunities, often with an incomplete

knowledge of the curriculum. Yet this instruction competed with time for teaching "foundational skills" and for other specialized instruction. The degree of confidence special educators may have had in defining instructional priorities may have been related to their degree of ownership of the standards. It was also influenced by the degree to which they had useful assessments of student learning. In a climate of time pressure, knowing what to leave in and what to leave out in a semester's worth of instruction was a key challenge facing special education teachers.

In summary, the research pointed to a number of challenges and few solutions. What can be concluded is that we must still go a long way toward defining what curricular "access" means for ***all*** students. We must also become more strategic and more committed to designing professional development for general and special educators that promotes mutual understanding of standards and curricula and of how diverse students learn. Instructional planning must result in more than a sequence of lesson plans; it must become a road map for bringing a group of students on different routes to some common destinations.

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